

Whatever You Ask

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Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father might be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it. John 14:13,14

One of the best commentaries on this passage is in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Early in the novel, Miss Watson, a sister to the Widow Douglas, undertakes to "sivilize" Huck, a procedure that involves a good deal of counseling and prayer.

Then Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work. By and by, one day I asked Miss Watson to try for me, but she said I was a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn't make it out no way.

I set down one time, back in the woods, and had a long think about it. I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver snuffbox that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, says I to myself, there ain't nothing in it. I went and told the widow about it, and she said that the thing a body could get by praying for it was "spiritual gifts." This was too many for me, but she told me what she meant – I must help other people, and do everything I could for other people, and look out for them all the time, and never think about myself. This was including Miss Watson, as I took it. I went out in the woods and turned it over in my mind a long time, but I couldn't see no advantage about it – except for the other people – so I reckoned I wouldn't worry about it anymore, but just let it go. Sometimes the widow would take me one side and talk about Providence in a way to make a body's mouth water; but maybe next day Miss Watson would take hold and knock it all down again. I judged I could see there was two Providences, and a poor chap would stand considerable show with the widow's Providence, but if Miss Watson's got him there warn't no help for him any more. I thought it all out, and reckoned I would belong to the widow's if he wanted me, though I couldn't make out how he was agoing to be any better off then than what he was before, seeing I was so ignorant and so kind of low-down and ornery.¹

The truth is, Huck is on to something. He may be "low-down and ornery," but he suspects that God is about something more than fishhooks and snuffboxes, that in fact, God is a miserable failure when sent on such "useful" errands, even when what we want are the kinds of "spiritual gifts" that would render us conspicuously unselfish. Rather, Huck appears to believe that whatever else God is after, God is after our own hearts, no matter how "low-down and ornery" we are, and that asking for anything

from even this kind “Providence” may well require of us more than we are prepared to give.

That’s the problem, isn’t it? It’s not that Jesus’ words about asking are too easy, or even too hard. They are, rather, impossible. For to ask anything in Christ’s name is to enter into Christ’s story, a story of death and resurrection which regularly embarrasses us with its refusal to heed our beck and call. This story even resists our efforts to “improve” it by moralizing its possibilities into something we find more congenial. Christ’s story compels us to do the opposite, to do the hard and humbling work of asking.

There are times, I suspect, that when we discover that God is not in the business of supplying us with fishhooks, we lose interest in asking; we no longer see any *point* in asking or believing or hoping. After all, if faith doesn’t pay off, what good is it? And, to be sure, there are other gods whose promises are much more “useful.” “Where do you want to go today?” a well-known software company asks us. You can go anywhere you want, the implication is. Just point and click. Just charge it. Just do it. The trick is to live so that you don’t ever really have to ask. Asking is, in our sort of world, associated with bad manners and needy people. People who really have to ask for things are the people who come to our soup kitchens or to our assistance ministries. They come to us looking for help, not wondering where they might go today, but wondering whether they will get through the day at all. They are the ones who ask. And, we think, they are the ones who have to ask; that is their plight. “I thank thee, Lord, that I am not so desperate as to be like these other folks and *have* to ask.”

But Jesus, in this passage in John, implies that following him means learning to ask; that, in fact, we do not follow him very far at all before we find ourselves in great need. He himself is speaking to his disciples the night of his betrayal, the night before his crucifixion. It is not surprising that in such a context some hard questions begin to emerge. “Let not your hearts be troubled,” Jesus tells his obviously troubled disciples; “believe in God, believe also in me.” We say these words most often over a freshly opened grave, as we stand helpless before death. Jesus offers them to his disciples, as if he were telling them that just such a storm is about to break over their heads and they will learn what it means not to have, what it means to be frightened and helpless and alone.

I sometimes think this is why prayer is so difficult for people today. For nothing reveals our desperation quite like prayer. Prayer, for folk whose biggest problem is figuring out where they want to go today, is a humiliating business, even a painful thing. We hate to ask.

But what should we ask for? World peace? Comfort for students and teachers in schools permeated by violence? An end to the ethnic strife in the Balkans? Stronger families, more faithful churches, more compassionate hearts? Such a list represents real needs and desirable outcomes and, no doubt, we should pray for such things. But in some ways to do so almost seems too easy, as if we were sending God to fetch our spiritual snuffboxes or high-minded fishhooks. There’s something missing, isn’t there? Something that would keep such a prayer from being merely the pious wishes of a comfortable church that no longer expects much from God and is a bit offended at having to ask God for help at all.

What is it that is missing?

Recently I read a column by one of my favorite interpreters of the culture, Dorothy

Rabinowitz. She tells the story of a man who was caught in traffic and was playing with his radio dial to pass the time. In the course of that, he came on a talk show hosted by what is known in the trade as a "Shock Jock," someone who says outrageous things in public in the hope of compelling listeners to hear what is usually forbidden. Finding what is forbidden within our culture these days must be an increasingly difficult task, for in truth, not much seems to be forbidden. It takes a lot to shock us. Indeed, we are like a person who is addicted to drugs, who needs a bigger and bigger "hit" to achieve the same effect. In any case, this "Shock Jock" read a news story about the refugees fleeing Kosovo, and reported that some of them might come to this country as immigrants. He began talking about the women and how some of them appeared to be real "babes" who were probably hungry for a good time. I will not repeat what he said but you can guess his words. The news story added that a Jewish group in Los Angeles had raised ten thousand dollars to help the refugees. "Yeah," the jock continued, "maybe they can buy some ovens for the Jews." The man listening to the radio could not believe his ears. Is this what we have sunk to, he thought, the disparagement of the needy and miserable and poor; the dehumanizing of women; the old, old contempt for the Jews? "Am I the only one who is hearing this?" he wondered. The next day he called the newspaper and the TV and radio stations, not to complain, but to ask if they had heard what was being said on the radio. Did they know? Were they going to write an article about this or condemn it? And the reply he received was that such things no longer shock anymore and are not even newsworthy. Just turn off the radio, he was told.²

It's harder and harder to turn off the radio, not just mechanically, but in the sense of being able to turn off the culture. The loss of one's soul does not always happen fast. Indeed, I suspect, it happens most often quite gradually, even comfortably over a long period of time. You hardly notice, and then one day, everything has changed. In the musical *Cabaret*, such a story is told all too well. It is the story of how a culture loses its soul, not suddenly but slowly, as it learns to laugh at the wrong things until the wrong things seem right. "If you could see her through my eyes," the emcee sings while dancing with a gorilla dressed as a woman, "If you could see her through my eyes," and we laugh. What could be more ludicrous than this dandy cavorting on stage with a gorilla in a woman's evening gown? We laugh, all the way to the final punch line: "If you could see her through my eyes, she wouldn't look Jewish at all." And before we know it, our laughter has covered up our shame and we don't even feel the shock anymore. We've just lost our souls and it was entirely painless.

So what then do you pray for? For what do you ask? What is hardest for me is to love the world I have almost come to despise. How do you love a world when it is increasingly hard to turn the culture's radio off and what is spewing out is such hatred? Peggy Noonan writes about "the culture of death" in which we and our children swim, the sound of which comes to us with the evening news. She offers a probably not random selection of recent stories, stories that are all too familiar to us "... she was found strangled and is believed to have been molested... the actress had her breast implants removed... he took the stand to say the killer was smiling the day the show aired ... he died of lethal injection... she had threatened to kill her children.... she said that he turned and said, 'You better put some ice on that,' ... he had asked Kevorkian for help in killing himself... he showed no remorse.... which is about a wager over whether he would sleep with another student."³ Just news stories, a daily drumbeat

from our culture's radio.

So why not dismiss such a world? Anybody who tells you he is not tempted to do so is not telling the truth, I suspect. After all, who wants, even in anger, to do the hard work of living in opposition to such a world? Many of us live in places so pleasant that we can momentarily delude ourselves into thinking that the sound of the culture cannot reach us. We needn't ask for anything much, for we are not much in need. Or are we? Are we coming perilously close to losing our own souls, not through some act of brutality but through our own contempt for this world? That is a contempt I have no trouble feeling, a dismissive anger which seems to me is entirely justified. Yet what is needed, what we do not have, is the courage to love a world that acts so contemptibly, the courage to love this world and to know when not to laugh, and to know what is at stake in our not laughing, and yet, even more, to know how to embrace this world, how to hold on to it, how to ask for God's help in loving this world.

That's hard. No, that is impossible. This is why we must pray that the Holy Spirit will help us to pray. It takes a miracle even for us to ask. But then one day the Holy Spirit shows you a miracle, a miracle like the folks I will call the Smiths. Mrs. Smith and her husband decided to have a baby, and they did, and he was born less than two months ago, a handsome, apparently healthy son. But soon problems began to show up. The baby was not developing normally. One day the anxious parents took him to the doctor, and after a series of tests were performed, they heard from the doctor's lips what no parent should ever have to hear: "Your child has an incurable disease, like Lou Gehrig's Disease, only worse. He won't survive the next few months. There is nothing we can do. All you can do is hold him in your arms and love him."

"If you ask anything in my name, I will do it." So prayers went up, prayers for the impossible, prayers for life. And they were not answered, or at least, not in the way desired. The child grew steadily worse. One day, the grandparents went to visit, fearing the worst, not knowing what to say. As they entered the baby's room, their daughter was cradling her son in her arms, singing a lullaby to him. After a while, she asked her mother if she would like to hold him and, as the grandmother took her grandson into her arms, her daughter said, "I love my son. I'm so blessed to have been given this wonderful child to love. It is no small gift to do nothing else but hold him in my arms and love him."

Nothing could be done and no prayers for a recovery were answered, but her words of faith were the answer to a world we don't often like very much and would prefer to dismiss: God is so good to give us this world to love, to cradle in our arms, to hold in our hands, even when we can't fix it.

Being able to say that, I suppose, is the test of what we pray for – whether when we pray in Jesus Christ's name, we can embrace the gift he gives us; whether we can love the world he loves.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, a young monk's teacher dies. The teacher is Father Zossima and he is Alyosha's spiritual father. Father Zossima, not only dies but is revealed in death to be as human and earthy as the rest of us. Prior to his death, the good Father had told the young novice, Alyosha, to leave the monastery and live in the world. There are people in this world, he tells Alyosha, who need you, people who are struggling with guilt and shame and sorrow, people who have lost hope. But Alyosha does not want to leave. He loves his teacher and he loves the faith; he knows what sort of place the world is. But then the old monk dies and far from ascending into some

glorious, celestial sphere is revealed to be as fleshly and mortal and earthy as a common sinner. His student, Alyosha, is angry and embarrassed at this turn of events and runs away from the monastery, only to return late at night to hear another old priest reading the gospel lesson over the decomposing body of the elder. The passage, like ours, is from the Gospel of John, but it is from the second chapter, the story of the wedding at Cana. As Alyosha listens to that old story again, he is struck by its note of joy, the outrageous extravagance revealed in Jesus' act of turning water into wine for people who just wanted a bit of happiness. His teacher had told him, "He who loves men loves their happiness too.... There's no living without joy." He turns to leave, knowing now that God does not despise this troubled world, but rather that God comes in the flesh to make us rejoice and be glad. The gladness of some very poor people at a wedding was Jesus' first miracle. Alyosha rushes out of the monastery.

He did not stop on the steps either, but went quickly down; his soul overflowing with rapture.... The vault of heaven, full of soft, shining stars, stretched vast and fathomless before him.... The white towers and golden domes of the church gleamed out against the sapphire sky.... The mystery of earth was one with the mystery of the stars... Alyosha stood, gazed out before him and then suddenly threw himself down on the earth. He did not know why he embraced it. He could not have told why he longed so irresistibly to kiss it, to kiss it. But he kissed it weeping and watering it with his tears, and vowed passionately to love it forever, to love it forever and ever....⁴

As the song has it, "love is the answer." But oh, what Love. And oh, what an answer. It forms itself in the cradling of a dying child, in the embracing of a confused and angry world, in kissing the earth with our tears. Hell, Father Zossima reminds us, "is the suffering of being unable to love."⁵ This is why we gather at the table to receive the gift of heaven touching earth, the gift of God's Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ, enabling us to do the miraculous, to love this world. For at the table, Love forms itself in the breaking of the bread in order that we might see how it embraces the world, and it pours itself out so that we might taste its wine and discover its joy. That is what we ask for, with all our heart, and that is what Jesus never fails to give us: to be taken up into his body, his life, so that we may love, so that we may know the gladness and joy of loving his world.

Notes

¹ Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, in *The Complete Novels of Mark Twain*, Vol. 1, ed. Charles Neider (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 746, 747.

² Dorothy Rabinowitz, "The Shock of Recognition," *The Wall St. Journal*, 26 April 1999, A16.

³ Peggy Noonan, "The Culture of Death," *The Wall St. Journal*, April 22, 1999, A22. The phrase, "the culture of death" is borrowed by Ms. Noonan from the Pope, who has used it to describe the ills of contemporary culture, especially in the West.

⁴ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by Constance Garrett (New York: Signet Classic, 1957), 333-34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 297. The full quote reads: "Father and teachers, I ask: 'What is hell?' I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love."